

AUGUST 13, 1981

Different reasons are being given all the time for the lackluster interest in stocker ewes and cows over at San Angelo. Normally when the Shortgrass Country has any grass, the herders keep a steady flame underneath the market for woolies and hollow horns. But this time six or seven months of unseasonable good rains have failed to spark a stampede to the buyers' circle.

High interest is probably the biggest deterrent. Also, feeder lambs and calves have been as unpredictable as the foreign policy in Central America. Sheep, in particular, have been a surprise. I expected last December to see any age of old ewe take off into big dollars, the only competition being the money that was being bet on replacement ewe lambs.

Early winter weeds weren't the sole reason that made sheep seem like a good buy. It looked to me that, as much as inflation had added on to keeping a mother cow, sheep numbers were going to have to go up to support their pasture mates.

We'd been having to stock 75 ewes to the section to be able to afford to own 13 cows on the same space. The few outfits that ran goats were able to juggle the ratio accordingly to adjust for that added income. As a rule, however, 70 or 80 head of woolies were enough to support that amount of cattle and allow a little left over to encourage a man and his family to stay in business.

New oil and gas wells were another factor that should have been a subsidy for cattle. I want to stop and explain that oil and gas income has been very good to a lot of ranchers out here. Farther west of San Angelo than we are located, some big strikes have rewarded plenty of the herders. Oil brings a different kind of income. It's sold from steel tanks. So far, coyotes and eagles don't drink up the profits nor do poison weeds dry up a strata. Tax collectors do take a grand share of the proceeds, but when a dry hole is plugged, or the casing caves in, the oil operator is the one that has to call what would amount to our calling the rendering plant in our business. Nevertheless, I didn't see the new oil barons making much noise around the markets. I'm sure they helped, but not in the amounts that could have been spent.

My sister came by last week, suffering from too much grass. She was in an awful stir to find some cattle to harvest a patch of kleingrass. Her principle vocation is selling stocks and bonds at a brokerage house in the San Angelo area. Watching stock trades had made her allergic to throwing money away. She had used up 30 pages of legal pad trying to match some cattle to her crop of introduced grass.

After we talked awhile, I suggested that she put earthworms on her grass. I'd just read that earthworms refertilize the ground faster than any kind of four-legged animal. Since that was about all that cattle had been contributing, it sounded like a few million head of red worms were the best investment.

I can't tell you whether she liked the idea or not, because she changed the subject pretty quick to the big merger on Wall Street. I guess it is hard for a stock broker to switch over to stocking a ranch. In time she may be back to listen to my advice.

August is the month when the winter sheepman starts to move. Auction reports make the stockers sound like a bargain. Perhaps the cooling temperatures of fall will respark the trade. I never thought I'd be thinking of earthworms over a mother cow.